

STATEMENT OF SAGE DOUGLAS REMINGTON

ON S. 1771

BEFORE THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS AND
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

JUNE 24, 1998

INTRODUCTION

Mike-Ku, in the native Ute language, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 1771. I am the spokesman for the Southern Ute Grassroots Organization (SUGO), which is a group of approximately 350 Southern Ute Tribal members who live on the Southern Ute reservation in Colorado, and who are opposed to Senate Bill 1771.

History of Grassroots Opposition to Animas La Plata and S. 1771.

The roots of SUGO go back to 1989 when a group of concerned Southern Ute Tribal members formed the *Committee For Better Tribal Government*. The committee's principal concern was that the best interests of the majority of Ute people were not being properly represented in the Animas-La Plata Reclamation Project (ALP). This group of Southern Ute Tribal members gathered the necessary signatures to mandate a recall election for the Tribal Council Chairman and several members of the Tribal Council. With some questionable maneuvering, the incumbents succeeded in disqualifying one recall vote. This made the election result in a tie. Under the Tribal Constitution, the tie preserved the status quo. Dissatisfaction with ALP, abuses of power and lack of responsiveness by the Tribal Government did not die after the failed recall attempt. The organizers of the *Committee for Better Government* proceeded to form the Southern Ute Grassroots Organization (SUGO).

I have been instructed by the SUGO Elder Council to present a cultural and political perspective that is in conflict with the mainstream political and cultural value system. My colleagues in opposition to the Animas-La Plata Project will speak about the environmental, taxpayer, and economic concerns that we all share.

Ute people have maintained their connection with the land and water since there were loosely confederated bands of a people called the "Nuche". We believe that rocks, trees, the rivers and the Earth are alive. We have lost most of our land base through violent assault and "legal" manipulations that have separated the Utes from their land and water.

The Ute's share with other traditional tribal people three primary political principles:

- 1 . All land, water and other natural resources are communally owned by the tribe;

private ownership of land, water or goods beyond those of the immediate household is unthinkable.

2. All tribal decisions are by consensus, in which every tribal member participates; and,
3. Tribal Council and leaders are not coercive or authoritarian as their non-Indian counterparts.

It is with a heavy heart that the Southern Ute Grassroots Organization must declare that the current Tribal Council has failed to protect our traditional Ute cultural and spiritual values, and serves instead as an arm of the natural resources development interests, making deals that the Southern Ute tribal membership has never approved.

There has never been a general council meeting of the Southern Ute people dedicated to a discussion about the benefits of the Animas-La Plata Project. In general council meetings, every adult member of the tribe is permitted to speak. Discussion continues until consensus is reached.

There has not been a detailed accounting in the Southern Ute Tribal Council minutes or the tribal newspaper of how our water, stored in the distant Ridges Basin reservoir, would benefit the tribe. Much of the documentation that SUGO has about the project has been acquired through the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act. Questions asked in Southern Ute Tribal General meetings go unanswered.

Development of Alternative to the Animas La Plata Project.

In December, 1996, SUGO held a meeting with members of the Southern Ute tribal membership to discuss an alternative to the Animas-La Plata Project. It was at this time that the Ute Legacy Land and Water Fund concept was developed. Ute tribal members who had land assignments and allotments were asked, "What would you like to see result from this project? " Their responses were unanimous. Ute tribal members wanted to restore the integrity of the Ute land base with the purchase of land and water rights, on the reservation.

The Ute Legacy Land and Water Fund was introduced at the February, 1997, Romer / Schoettler meeting in Towaoc, Colorado, and has been incorporated into the Citizens Coalition alternative which is one of the two alternatives being analyzed by the Bureau of Reclamation.

CONCLUSION

The Southern Ute Grassroots Organization would ask the committees to vote no on S. 1771. Animas-La Plata Lite would tear at the very core of the Southern Ute community.

The Southern Ute tribal membership should have a voice in the decision process of the Animas-La Plata Project. Currently the Southern Ute people have initiated another referendum to recall all members of the current Tribal Council.

The tribal membership should formulate and achieve an alternative water rights settlement

package that is kinder to the environment, more consistent with Ute cultural values, and which will better serve the long term economic interests of the tribe.